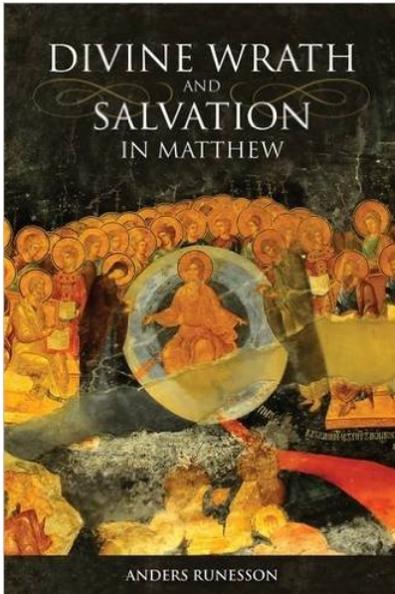


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Anders Runesson

Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew: The Narrative World of the First Gospel

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Anders Runesson is currently Professor of New Testament Studies at the University of Oslo, Norway, and already a recognized authority on Matthew's Gospel and other New Testament writings in their historical, sociocultural, and religious contexts. Over two decades in gestation, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew* is a landmark work, not only in Matthean or even gospel studies but also in New Testament theology more broadly. It explores a major and also distinctive Matthean theme with historical and hermeneutical integrity, offering sagacious suggestions for making good—because responsible—sense of Matthew's peculiar thematic structures in our own vastly different context(s). Although one cannot know in advance what impact a scholarly work may have, this is a potentially agenda-shaping book.

Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew is neatly structured in two principal (albeit uneven) parts. After a detailed preface and a fairly lengthy introduction that provides helpful context and orientation, the body of this book is divided into two parts of four chapters each—three substantive chapters of varying lengths followed by a brief recapitulation of each part. (For this reason, chapters 4 and 8, the conclusions to parts 1 and 2, are not discussed in this review.) Part 1 examines the theme of divine judgment and salvation in relation to God's people, Israel, whereas part 2 explores the same theme

with reference to non-Jews. A brief concluding chapter reviews the meaning of divine judgment and salvation in Matthew's narrative world.

In his introductory chapter Runesson points out that the notion of divine judgment was a foundational conviction in the *circum*-Mediterranean world of antiquity. Within texts held to be sacred or authoritative, expressions of divine sanction encoded deep-seated social mores and moral norms. Runesson also observes that divine judgment could be expressed in various ways, an important consideration for interpreting Matthew's Gospel. In this connection, he might also have noted at this point (see 396) that within an ancient Israelite context divine judgment is the theological-moral corollary of the even more basic tenet that Israel's God is the creator of the cosmos and of all life within it. Seen as the prerogative of the creating and electing God, the concept of judgment is inherently more nuanced than just recompense, strictly conceived. In any case, to focus on the theme of divine judgment within an ancient text is, for Runesson, a means of feeling the pulsing lifeblood of "core aspects of the identity and social practices of a religious group" (2).

Critical to Runesson's project is his determination to interpret Matthew's Gospel without the anachronistic assumption that the messianic convictions of its author and audience contributed to a "Christian" identity either separate from or antithetical to an inherently "Jewish" identity. Rather, Matthew is read from an intra-Israelite viewpoint, that is, as a text representing one of several expressions of late first-century Judaism. Succinctly expressed, Runesson's objective is "to understand Matthew's story from a first-century Jewish horizon" (216). In this connection, Runesson explains that the basic structure of the argument he constructs—by analyzing first the theme of divine judgment with respect to Jews and only thereafter divine judgment of non-Jews—correlates to Matthew's intra-Israelite mindset: "Matthew displays no interest in erasing the basic Jewish worldview in which all other nations (*ethnē*) are understood as 'the other'" (27).

The introduction also clarifies that this study focuses on Matthew's narrative world, albeit complemented by historical-critical investigation of contextual data to assist in reaching a plausible approximation to a first-century Jewish reading. Runesson also emphasizes that for Matthew divine judgment cannot be adequately comprehended except in close connection with such Hebraic notions as divine grace or mercy (*hesed*), covenant, law, atonement, and righteousness (24). Indeed, for Runesson, Matthew's Gospel exemplifies the theological stance dubbed by E. P. Sanders as "covenantal nomism." To understand Matthew well, one must go nowhere among the nations, or, if that is where one happens to be located, one must tread the taxing road that leads to an intra-Israelite vantage point. If there is an identifiable group from antiquity close to the religious stance of Matthew, that group, according to Runesson, is the faction of Christian Pharisees referred to in Acts 15:1–5.

Part 1 of the book is devoted to “judging and saving the Jewish people,” which opens with a brief chapter on the timing of divine judgment for the people of God. Runesson identifies three decisive occasions of judgment: in this world, in the world to come, and at the final judgment, which looms large in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ instruction.

Following his brief first chapter, Runesson devotes a long second chapter to the question of criteria for judgment of God’s chosen people. The chapter unfolds by addressing in detail eight major topics: sin and guilt; obedience and righteousness; vicarious righteousness; repentance and forgiveness; whether or not *pistis* (faithfulness or loyalty) is a criterion of judgment; whether or not Jesus himself is a criterion of judgment; ways in which “works of law” constitute criteria of judgment; and covenant and grace. As Runesson articulates the focal question of this chapter: “on what grounds are [Jewish] individuals and/or groups in Matthew’s narrative world punished or rewarded (in this world and the next), and under what circumstances is access to the eschatological kingdom granted?” (53). By examining various criteria of judgment relating to God’s chosen people, Runesson articulates a nuanced and indeed dynamic conception of divine judgment and salvation in Matthew’s Gospel.

On the role of the Mosaic law in Matthew’s theology, Runesson concurs with those who maintain that Matthew upheld the continuing validity of the law in its entirety, including its ceremonial and cultic dimensions, albeit with Jesus as its authoritative interpreter. Understood from within a contemporaneous Jewish matrix, apparently conflicting Matthean texts relating to the Torah (and the Prophets) prove comprehensible and indeed meaningful. To follow Jesus, according to Matthew, is to adhere to the Torah as interpreted by Jesus, who fulfilled rather than abrogated the law. Indeed, by his voluntary and vicarious death conceived in sacrificial terms, Jesus makes possible the continuing efficacy of atonement for sin as provided for in the Torah, especially after the destruction of the temple. In contrast with those who consider that Matthew conceives of salvation as contingent on Torah-observance, Runesson contends that Matthew’s understanding of salvation is grounded in God’s covenantal grace and mercy—by giving the law in the first instance and by sending Jesus to save God’s people from their sins. Furthermore, the life-saving mission of Jesus has two fundamental features: in life, to interpret divine revelation (Torah) as originally intended; and in death, to provide an atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins and thereby restore the broken covenant. Divine judgment of deeds occurs within this covenantal framework.

In light of the centrality of Jesus to Matthew’s Gospel, however, including his narrative status as the authoritative interpreter of the Torah and his decisive salvific agency by means of his voluntary and vicarious death, questions may be asked of Runesson’s discussion of divine judgment based on how Jewish people respond to the person or

character of Jesus. There is little to gainsay in Runesson's treatment of distinctions between the person of Jesus and God, between Jesus himself and his mission of proclaiming God's heavenly reign, and between Jesus and divine Spirit active in his mission. Moreover, by contrast with the Fourth Gospel, as Runesson correctly notes, Matthew does not define judgment primarily in terms of how people respond to Jesus. But when he goes so far as to say that for Matthew, "criteria of judgment are intertwined with the message of Jesus *rather than* the person of Jesus" (147, emphasis added), is Matthew's *narrative* susceptible to such clear-cut analytical distinctions? With respect to Jesus, did the evangelist himself work with such binary categories: person and mission? Is it not the case that, despite the differentiation between God and Jesus within Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is nevertheless the locus of divine presence and life-saving efficacy, *Immanu-el*? Is it not also the case that for Matthew Jesus is as much the agent of God's heavenly reign—even if empowered by the Spirit—as its herald? Thus when Runesson downplays the role of Jesus in relation to divine judgment in contrast with the centrality of Jesus with respect to salvation, might this not be explained by the "secondariness" of judgment to salvation, as Matthew discerned divine priorities from the mission of Jesus?

Chapter 3 examines the theme of divine judgment in relation to various Jewish groups, paying attention to various leadership groups (chief priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians), the disciples of both John the Baptist and Jesus (discussed along with Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians under the subheading, "Groups with Indirect Political Influence"), the collective addressed by Jesus as "this generation," the crowds, and Israel as a whole. Behind the discussion in this chapter is a legitimate concern with Christian replacement theology, in which expressions of judgment directed against Jewish groups within Matthew's Gospel have been interpreted to imply divine rejection of Israel in favor of the church. Especially in relation to scribes, Pharisees, and "this generation," Runesson's exposition reveals extensive erudition and interpretive incisiveness.

Chapter 5, the first substantive chapter of part 2, explores the role and function of non-Jews in Matthew's Gospel, including the question of mission to non-Jews. Despite the presence within Matthew's narrative of exceptional non-Jews who both acknowledge and defer to the authority of Jesus, Matthew's default attitude toward non-Jewish culture and people is expressed in Matt 18:17: as a rule, non-Jews are to be avoided because they are without the blessing of Torah. Nevertheless, the final, authoritative command of Jesus to his disciples is to conduct an active proselytizing mission to non-Jewish nations with the intention of growing the number of disciples who adhere to the Torah as interpreted by Jesus.

Runesson's brief sixth chapter focuses on the timing of God's judgment of the nations. From fragmentary data within Matthew's Gospel Runesson concludes that divine judgment

of non-Israelites occurs, as for Israelites, within history, at the final judgment, and also in the world to come. Especially with respect to judgment of non-Jews in the world to come, Runesson is rather tentative in light of the paucity of relevant textual data. With respect to judgment at the end of the age, however, he avers that God will judge non-Jewish nations separately from and indeed subsequent to judging the people of Israel (among whom will be found some non-Israelite, Torah-observant followers of Jesus Messiah). His reason for confidence in this regard is set out in chapter 7, concerned with criteria of judgment for those who do not belong to God's people, Israel.

In this final substantive chapter of his book, Runesson discusses divine judgment of non-Jewish people under three categories: (1) preresurrection "Christ-fearers" or "righteous gentiles," who do not join God's people, Israel, but who subordinate themselves to the authority of Jesus as Israel's Messiah; (2) postresurrection proselytes, who join God's covenant people by baptism and commit to observing the Torah as interpreted by Jesus Messiah; and (3) postresurrection outsiders who never turn to the God of Israel, some of whom nevertheless show compassion toward disciples of Jesus. For the final category, Runesson focuses on the scenario of final judgment in Matt 25:31–46, which in his view depicts positive and negative recompense being meted out to non-Jews depending on whether or not they have acted mercifully toward disciples of Jesus. His interpretation of this passage has much to commend it, but it is perhaps overdetermined. It is not as though the narrative context of this scenario—the culmination of the fifth and final discourse within Matthew's Gospel, following a series of eschatological parables—makes plain that it is concerned solely with judging ethnic outsiders, *in contrast to the preceding parables*. Runesson reads this end-time scenario as occurring subsequent to the gathering of the elect referred to in Matt 24:31, but this smacks of "calendarizing" the eschatological discourse; indeed, Matt 25:31 might well be read as a recapitulation of 24:30–31 (perhaps also of 19:28!). Moreover, can one be as confident as Runesson that "*all* the nations" (25:32) excludes Israel? The call of Abraham in Gen 12 is important for his restricted interpretation of "all the nations," but Abraham was in some sense called from among the nations to form an elect ethnicity, and in Matthew's day many Israelites lived among the nations—in diaspora. Furthermore, although "one of these least" (25:45) might legitimately be understood as identical in meaning to "one of these my brothers—the least" (25:40), it is possible that the less restrictive "echo" in 25:45 leans in a universalizing direction. Runesson himself emphasizes that the utter unawareness of those judged that what they had done or failed to do is reckoned as relating to the judge himself is central to the scenario, but such unawareness would be more conceivable if those with whom the judge identifies are not restricted to his known followers. Finally, under the rubric of Matt 24:36, one hesitates to interpret the scenario of judgment in 25:31–46 too dogmatically, especially in light of the theological vision of the envisaged judge, whose perception of

divine recompense is not as something less than fair but rather as likely to be more generous than fair—as evidenced in the parable of hirelings in the vineyard (19:30–20:16), a parable to which Runesson pays scant attention in this book.

Further to recapitulating chapters (4 and 8) that conclude the two main parts of this book, *Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew* closes with a conclusion in which Runesson provides “some general comments on the overall historical reconstruction of Matthew’s story world and its meaning in terms of divine judgment” (435). Turning over the final pages of this book, one senses that its author has unlocked decisive exegetical and interpretive portals for comprehending Matthew’s Gospel better. This is a profoundly significant study that not only reveals Runesson’s erudition, which runs deep, but also opens up new avenues for exploration. Whether or not each and every one of the author’s interpretive inferences proves correct is less important than the basic hermeneutical stance he articulates and defends.

Among the many insights of this book, several stand out. First and foremost is Runesson’s defense of an intra-Israelite interpretive matrix for reading Matthew’s Gospel, thereby extricating, so to speak, this thoroughly Jewish text from Christian colonization. Second, Runesson helpfully traces the contours of Matthew’s conception of divine Spirit active in the mission of Jesus, which makes more comprehensible why speaking against the Holy Spirit is deemed to be unforgivable. Third, in contrast to the common view that Matthew envisages Jerusalem’s destruction as in some sense divine recompense for the death of Jesus, Runesson reconfigures the relation between Jesus’s death and the temple’s destruction such that, within an Israelite theo-ritual frame of reference, the destruction of the temple provides the rationale for Jesus’s sacrificial death, which makes possible continuing atonement for sins beyond the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Fourth, albeit related to the previous point, Runesson sheds light on the Israelite mindset that helps present-day readers to understand why Matthew and his Jewish contemporaries conceptualized the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple as divine punishment (354–55). These and other crucial concerns of this book claim continuing consideration.

Divine Wrath and Salvation in Matthew is a sizeable, painstaking, and hence demanding book requiring a certain level of commitment on the part of readers. More important, however, this is a big-hearted and right-minded book that displays its author’s profound historical erudition, judicious hermeneutical discernment, and keen theological vision. It deserves to be read widely, considered carefully, and discussed passionately.